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ABSTRACT

Four surveys of attitudes toward vocational education were conducted in three school districts in Nevada in 1988 to derive information for use in strengthening vocational education programs. The surveys were completed by 331 parents, 1,454 students, 154 vocational teachers, and 29 administrators. More than 85 percent of students and a smaller majority of parents (73 percent) perceived vocational education to have three purposes: to explore occupational areas, to develop general skills for later use at home or on the job, and to prepare for employment in specific occupations. The education level of the parents appeared to influence their perceived choice of purpose for vocational education; parents with less college education indicated more often that one of the purposes of vocational education was to prepare students for technical school. Approximately three-fourths of the students and four-fifths of the parents surveyed recommended that students take a vocational course, especially for the purpose of career exploration. Parents and students who did not recommend taking at least one vocational course cited choice of subject or that it was not necessary for college. Three-fourths of the parents had favorable opinions about vocational education. Nonvocational students did not enroll because of lack of interest and lack of time. The study recommended more teacher recruitment; more accessibility to the vocational education curriculum; more public relations activities to educate parents, students, and the community about the benefits of vocational education; additional vocational guidance; and other actions to increase enrollment in vocational education. (KC)

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CAUSES INFLUENCING DECLINING OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS

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CAUSES INFLUENCING DECLINING OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS

INTRODUCTION

In November of 1988, the Research and Educational Planning Center of the University of Nevada-Reno completed a study commissioned by the Nevada Department of Education for the purpose of providing school districts with information for strengthening their vocational education programs. The following summarizes the findings of the four surveys completed by 331 parents, 1,454 students, 154 vocational teachers, and 29 administrators. When appropriate, parallel or related findings from the four surveys appear, commonalities will be discussed. Interpretations will be included particularly as they relate to possible reasons for declining occupational enrollments.

It should be noted that this article is written in a non-technical manner so that the information can be easily digested by the reader. Although three Nevada school districts comprise the sample, it is believed that the findings and implications can be generalized or at least helpful to districts offering vocational education programs.

SURVEY RESULTS

Purposes of Vocational Education. The majority of students (87.3%) perceived occupational education to have three purposes: to explore occupational areas, to develop general skills for later use at home or on the job, and to prepare for employment in specific occupations. A slightly smaller percent of parents (72.6%) than students selected those same purposes with an

additional 12.5% of the parents also supporting the choice that vocational offerings were an alternative to academic classes.

These parents may philosophically view their child's education as being double-tracked for academic or vocational course work, even though present graduation requirements are not designed in this manner. Vocational education and academic courses should not be perceived as an either/or situation, but rather as a mutually supportive program of study for career preparation. A strong vocational guidance program should help students identify vocational courses that provide pre-employment or entry level skills essential for their chosen career as well as help in the selection of appropriate academic courses.

Education Level of Parents. The education level of parents appears to influence their perceived choice of purpose for vocational education. Parents with less college education indicated more often that one of the purposes of vocational education was to prepare students for technical school. A recommendation based on these findings is to have school districts evaluate the exposure parents have with vocational education. The reported educational backgrounds of parents in this study suggests that they have little personal experience with occupational education. Program information, post graduation benefits of vocational education and labor force information must be communicated to facilitate parental understanding of the importance of vocational education.

Recommendation of Vocational Courses. Approximately three-fourths of the students and four-fifths of the parents surveyed recommended that students take a vocational course. Parents'

first choice and students' second choice for recommending vocational courses was career exploration. Parents' second choice for vocational education was that students should learn job skills. Students' first choice--to learn everyday skills and preparation for the future--were more generalized than reasons given by parents.

A small number of parent and student respondents indicated vocational education was preparation for college. This is a viable argument for students to take vocational courses, but may not be currently stressed enough in occupational guidance programs. Vocational curriculum that includes skills in career planning, problem solving/decision making, data manipulation, resource management, systems of technology, economics of work, and human relations is applicable to the needs of the college bound student as well as the vocational student.

Reasons for Not Recommending Vocational Courses. Parents and students who did not recommend pursuing at least one vocational course, justified this response by stating that students should have the flexibility to choose elective subjects. Although not intended, respondents seemed to interpret the words recommendation and requirement to be synonymous. The second most frequent reason stated by parents implied that vocational education was not necessary for college bound students. The students' second reason indicated that it was not necessary for future plans. Other justifications provided by the respondents specified the concern that students did not always have adequate time or interest to pursue vocational courses. The only reason given which reflected a negative attitude asserted that vocational

education was not considered as important as other academic subjects.

In support of the opposing view that vocational education is necessary for the future plans of some students, employers regard the lack of a positive attitude, absence of general work skills, and a deficiency of specific technical skills as barriers to employment. An employees' inability to apply basic skills in the work place are perceived as additional obstacles to successful employment. Each of these impediments could be remediated or prevented through a student's participation in a strong vocational curriculum.

Opinions About Vocational Students. Opinions about vocational students were favorable. Three-fourths of the parents and students perceived vocational students to be better prepared for work and possess a broader educational background. A small percent (approximately 8%) of the parents and students felt there was no academic difference between vocational and nonvocational students. Less favorable opinions selected by approximately 7% of the parents and students implied that vocational students would be less prepared for college and have inferior academic ability.

Career Choices, Guidance, and Advisement. Ideally, vocational education programs should parallel job market demands, however students' career choices do not reflect these trends. As a result, career guidance in schools must include labor market statistics, job promotion, and career information. Survey results from teachers and administrators specified that not all students are receiving this information. Students also agreed that REQUIRED classes did not teach career information.

Schools should evaluate curriculum in search of methods to improve the career education of students. Group counseling techniques, computer assisted career guidance and coursework where students can receive information to base their career and course selections seem essential. One alternative for each school would be to offer a vocational exploratory or pre-employment course--a practice that was reported not readily utilized.

Another point of consideration regarding career guidance is that 63% of the students received encouragement to pursue college preparatory classes while the remaining 47% had been counseled to enroll in vocational courses. Although the source of advisement for college preparatory classes was not determined by the survey instrument, recommendations for vocational classes were attributed most often to counselors and parents with each credited for advisement approximately 30% of the time. If students are advised most often by counselors and parents, it is critical that these people are informed about vocational education programs so that students receive correct and unbiased information.

Teachers were credited for advisement only 10% of the time. Assuming this is an accurate assessment, a recommendation resulting from this study would be to increase teacher recruitment efforts. One administrator indicated that although the faculty was concerned that increased graduation requirements had resulted in decreased vocational enrollments, teachers had not taken a proactive stance to reduce these possible effects. Increased recruitment efforts can easily be initiated.

Reasons for not Enrolling in Vocational Courses. Students who completed the surveys were identified as either vocational or

nonvocational. Nonvocational students did not enroll in occupational courses due to lack of interest and insufficient time. Although the survey did not identify reasons for lack of interest, types of offerings in addition to the career and personal interests of students should be reviewed in detail on a school by school basis. Information gathered may be beneficial for program planning. Since attitudes toward vocational students appear to be positive, it can be assumed that negative attitudes were not a deterrent to student enrollment. Therefore, schools should determine if present vocational courses are meeting students interests. More extensive offerings or a different emphasis in existing courses should be evaluated as possible alternatives to meet student interests.

Although reasons for lack of time were not identified, a contributing factor may be additional graduation requirements--increases that have occurred over the last five years according to 97% of the teachers and administrators. According to survey results, some schools have increased the number of periods in the school day to enhance student accessibility to the curriculum. Another issue that needs to be addressed is whether scheduling allows a student to enroll in more classes or whether work, home responsibilities, or extra-curricular activities are the real time issue.

If students do have the desire to take vocational courses but are unable because of heavy academic loads, then schools should consider the practice of allowing academic credit earned for vocational course offerings to be substituted for mathematics and science courses. In the study, non-vocational students indicated an interest in pursuing vocational courses if these

credits fulfilled requirements in academic areas. A second alternative is to consider offering vocational courses during the summer. Cooperative work experience or field based learning with school credit and wages may be incentives to enroll in summer programs. Other school practices to alleviate the time crunch would be to increase the number of periods per school day and allow students to test out of required courses. A small percentage of teachers and administrators reported these practices to be presently utilized.

Plans After High School. Encouraged by their parents, 61% of the students plan to attend a four year college after high school even though college preparation is not always essential for jobs that will be available. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has stated that of the current group of college students, one in five will graduate and work in a occupation that needs no college education. By the year 2000, it is predicted that 88% of the available jobs will require workers with specific technical and vocational skills rather than a college education.

Reasons for Enrolling in Vocational Courses. High school vocational students appear to be aware of the benefits of occupational education. When asked what most influenced them to take vocational education courses, approximately one third of the students viewed high school vocational courses as preparation for jobs after high school as well as future educational pursuits, in addition to indicating an interest in vocational classes. Parents perceived attainment of vocational skills as a means to finance future education. Both parents and students also agreed that vocational education was a means to acquire essential skills for employment and everyday living.

Student ratings indicated satisfaction with vocational courses. Vocational courses were viewed to be more interesting by approximately 64% of the students. Over half of the students (57%) learned more or much more in vocational courses as compared to other high school courses.

Adequacy of Vocational Education. Since many parents are assuming the role of advisor for vocational courses, their perceptions about the adequacy of the schools in meeting vocational education purposes are crucial. Half of the parents felt schools were performing adequately, fair, or very well in meeting the purposes of vocational education. Comments from parent surveys that account for less than adequate ratings suggest that: (1) there is too much emphasis on academics; (2) vocational programs could be improved through the expansion of course content and the number of offerings; (3) vocational program equipment should be updated; and (4) student placement or guidance was not sufficient to help students identify career interest or to direct students into necessary courses for vocational preparation.

School Policies to Support Vocational Offerings. The procedures utilized by school districts to set and determine policies relative to occupational course offerings was not determined in this study. However, teachers viewed themselves as having little authority in decisions making. Teachers felt that administrators' attitudes toward vocational education and graduation requirements were the most influential in determining course or program offerings. It is not clear whether teachers viewed administrators as having positive or negative attitudes toward vocational education.

Teachers and administrators also disagreed about the role that student interest played in decision making relative to determining specific vocational courses that should be offered. Each group perceived student interest as receiving different amounts of consideration. How student interest and needs are assessed to determine occupational interest and course needs is an essential first step in positive program planning.

Discrepancies should be clarified through school district team meetings and discussion. The other point that needs clarification is the degree which student interest plays in determining program or course offerings.

Increasing Access to Vocational Programs. Schools reported using a variety of practices to encourage student accessibility to vocational courses. The two most common practices were allowing vocational courses for academic credit and summer school offerings. The study suggests that schools are exerting less effort in utilizing other methods. Practices such as competency testing, testing out of required classes, adjusting time allotments for vocational courses, flexible scheduling, increasing the number of school periods and student incentives were used by a small number of schools.

Graduation requirements and attitudes toward vocational education were seen by administrators and teachers to have negative effects on vocational enrollments. Parents' comments also supported this as drawbacks to student enrollments. Implications from parents were that some students did not have time to take classes other than the academics and that vocational students should be made to feel that their pursuits were equally important to the goals of the college bound student.

A majority of teachers and administrators considered student interest and instructional skills to have a positive influence on enrollments. Other factors believed to contribute to increased enrollments were community and parental involvement and course work reflecting the job market. Local, state, and federal funding and course/career advisement were selected by fewer respondents as influencing enrollments. Some parents were critical of advisement stating that it was not adequate in reaching the students who needed vocational education. These parents felt that students were given little guidance in determining vocational aptitudes, interest, or necessary preparation for the world of work. Other parent comments, indicated the need for more sequential courses, with content covering broader assortment of careers.

School Trends. The following trends--teaching for entry level positions in employment, providing equal access for males and females; recruitment efforts; teachers' opportunity to update occupational and teaching skills; and availability of co-op work experience or field based learning were reported on an average to occur sometimes in the schools. Administrators and teachers indicated that each of the trends made "important" or "very important" contributions to the success of a vocational program.

Other trends such as articulation with the business community, post-secondary institutions and between vocational teachers and counselors were reported as occurring less often. "Selling" vocational education or articulation through appropriate channels is critical to program planning and recruitment. Competency testing was utilized infrequently by schools, although one fourth of the respondents indicated this never happened.

Theoretically, placing individuals at the appropriate level of learning would make school more challenging and meaningful to each student.

Career Information. Both teachers and administrators indicated that career information was not likely to be given to students. Students vary substantially in their knowledge of the career decision making process. Career choices are based on a student's translation of their attitudes towards self and the working world. Although self understanding and perceptions about work are essential, it is equally important to have accurate and realistic information about the career opportunities.

Exploratory occupational courses, counselor group techniques, computer assisted guidance, and the immersion of career concepts into the general and academic curriculum were reported to occur sometimes or rarely. As a result schools should encourage dissemination of information while counselors assume leadership in the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills for employment. Parent comments indicated concern that students were getting minimum career information and as well course advisement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are warranted from the study:

1) Policies for determining program and course offering should be evaluated at the district level. A policy allowing teacher input is essential.

2) Vocational teachers and administrators need to articulate the extent that administrators' attitudes and student interest play in program planning.

3) Since increased graduation requirements have impacted on vocational course offerings individual school assessment of current methods utilized to improve student accessibility should be reviewed. Many methods such as competency testing, testing out of required classes, increasing the number of periods per school day, flexible scheduling, on the job training and student incentives could be utilized more frequently.

4) Course content and focus of present vocational courses should be assessed for assurance that present vocational offerings match student needs and interests. This may be done cooperatively with vocational counselors to receive input regarding student aptitudes and career guidance efforts.

5) School district personnel should create an awareness of vocational education through concentrated public relations activities which educate parents, students, and community in general about the benefits of vocational education.

6) Vocational guidance must be increased so that students enroll in courses that best meet their goals and aptitude.

7) Teachers should be encouraged to actively recruit students into vocational courses.

8) School curriculum should focus on the importance of inter-relatedness of vocational and academic coursework.

9) Occupational education programs should accept the responsibility for the development and incorporation of communication and computational skills into the curriculum.